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Building your following by expanding your digital marketing ~ article by Christine Umbrell for O&P Almanac



BUILD
Your
FOLLOWING

Expand your digital marketing efforts to attract referral sources, patients, and media coverage

NEED TO KNOW:

-  As today's health-care consumers turn to their computers and smartphones to research medical issues and find health-care providers, many O&P facilities are developing digital marketing strategies to promote their services.
-  A facility's website can significantly influence a consumer's decision to call for an appointment. In addition to mobile-friendly design and useful content, the website should have a high search engine optimization value by featuring keywords that win favor with Google and other search engines.
-  Some facilities may benefit from investing in search engine marketing, or SEM—purchasing ads that appear on the result pages of search engines (such as Google) to capture the interest of web browsers.
-  Consider your audience when deciding which social media platforms to post to. Some facilities have found that intentional, regular posting on Facebook can draw business, while Twitter can be useful for branding news and following industry experts.
-  Blogs provide a space for a facility to demonstrate its expertise, offer valuable information, and create engaging, keyword-rich content that will elevate the website's status in search engines.
-  The most important rule when establishing a digital marketing campaign is to realize you can't do it all, says one expert. Choose the platforms that will best meet your goals, and create a manageable marketing plan that can be carried out by either in-house staff or outside consultants.

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“O&P professionals do amazing things but often don’t want to self-promote. It’s OK to share what your facility is doing and to let your community know about you.” Christina Thronsdon

RECENT STUDIES INDICATE THAT today’s consumers are turning to their computers, tablets, and smartphones to find health-care providers. More than 40 percent of consumers say that information found via social media affects the way they deal with their health, and 77 percent of online health-care consumers began their last session at a search engine such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo, according to Pew Internet Research. Young adults are even more swayed by e-health information: Ninety percent of 18- to 24-year-olds say they trust medical information shared by others on their social media networks, according to PwC Health Research Institute.

Some O&P facilities are meeting the demand for online medical information head-on by building mobile-friendly websites, joining social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, writing content-rich blogs, and creating facility-specific apps. But others have dedicated fewer resources to these ventures and continue to rely on traditional marketing efforts such as print ads, in-services with referral sources, and conventional word-of-mouth advertising. While old-school marketing methods remain instrumental in drawing business to O&P facilities, future growth and profitability will depend on a more diverse marketing strategy that incorporates an increased digital presence.

Whether your facility has a dedicated marketing staffer, spreads your online presence and build a social media following.

Setting a Strategy

O&P facilities, with a focus on returning people of all ages to their activities of daily living, are perfectly positioned to share inspirational stories online, says Christina



Thronsdon, web marketing director for VGM Forbin, a company that designs websites and web applications for health-care companies.

“O&P professionals do amazing things, but often don’t want to self-promote,” says Thronsdon. In an increasingly digital world, “it’s OK to share what your facility is doing and to let your community know about you,” she says. Websites and electronic resources should be leveraged to educate and show referral sources, current and potential patients, and even media build up their trust in you.”

To ensure you are meeting the online needs of the patient bases in your community, begin by developing a digital marketing strategy to determine what you want to accomplish. Look at the demographics of your patient base, plus the characteristics of the patients you hope to attract. For example, are you

looking to catch the eye of young, athletic patients, who may be searching for high-tech O&P devices on social media? Or are you better positioned to focus on diabetics, who may benefit from a page on your website dedicated to educational resources about healthy eating and foot care?



Christina Thronsdon

referral sources, or the local community—or some combination of all three.

Once you have a focus, examine the different areas where you can increase your online visibility, take a look at the different social media platforms, and decide how to maximize your staff time and resources to boost your outreach efforts.

Search Engine Marketing

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF "FREE" social media channels can be a great way to post content and increase awareness of an O&P facility. In addition, many O&P facilities may profit from harnessing the power of search engine marketing (SEM)—purchasing ads that appear on the result pages of search engines (such as Google) to capture those web browsers who may benefit from your facility's services.



By advertising with Google and other search engines, your ads will appear above or below Google search results or as image advertisements on popular affiliate websites. "Don't forget to utilize the tools available within the advertising platform to target your audience based on previous engagement, audience behavior, interaction, and location. These are all tactics that can help provide the biggest bang for your buck," says Christina Thronson, web marketing director for VGM Forbin, a company that designs

websites and web applications for health-care companies. "For a small facility, it's actually one of the best investments your company can make."

Pay-per-click advertising can take the form of paid ads through Google Adwords, Facebook Local Awareness Ads, and others. These can range from \$0.30 per click with Adwords, to \$1 per day with Facebook.

"I'm a big fan of SEM and focusing on who your audience is, and where they are online and geographically," says Thronson. She suggests finding ways to re-engage users that have been to your site, started to engage on a form, and left: "Stay in front of them and catch their attention before they move on to a different site."

Thronson also encourages O&P business owners to make sure they have claimed and own directory listings for their companies, such as those included on Yelp and Google (My Business Listing). Assign staff to monitor company reviews on these types of sites: "It's not just making sure you have good reviews, but making sure you respond to all reviews—the good, the bad, and the indifferent," she says.

Building a Better Website

One of the first communications tools to review when upgrading your digital marketing efforts is your website. A website is a window to your facility, and often, the content found there significantly influences a consumer's decision to call for an appointment.

Your website should appeal to your particular audience and provide easy access to the information you want them to know once they are engaged, says Thronson. "Ask yourself, 'If I push my audience to my site for more information, does my site allow them to do or find what they need to accomplish my goals?'" For example, your site should feature highly visible contact and location information. Thronson also



suggests finding a way to measure your goals, such as call tracking or online analytics for conversions and interactions.

Your website should be designed to have a high search engine optimization (SEO) value. To encourage SEO performance, strategically place the most commonly searched keywords relevant to your facility throughout your site, so they win favor with Google and other

search engines. These search engines rank pages based on two primary metrics: authority (a measure of how many people share or link back to your content) and relevancy (a measure of how well you create content that relates to the keywords users type into search engines). A high Google ranking means more browsers will be led to your website.

“Sunshine Prosthetics and Orthotics in Wayne, New Jersey, is a solo facility with a dynamic website, complete with education information and bi-weekly blog post”

Reach Orthotic & Prosthetic Services (OPS), with four locations in Virginia, recently redesigned its website to appeal to a wider audience. “With the power and ease of the Internet, many people are doing a lot of research and discovery on their own,” says Anne Sych, the company’s marketing coordinator. “Health-care services are no different. Patients and physicians alike want to learn about the practices and clinicians that will be serving them. We want to make it easy for them to learn about Reach OPS when making these decisions.”



Anne Sych

Reach’s new Wordpress site has a built-in blog tool and is mobile-friendly, says Sych. It features, among other sections, a patient resource area with educational materials and a dedicated section for referral sources “to help them understand the best way to refer services and manage timelines for their patients,” she says.

While larger companies such as Ability Prosthetics & Orthotics (P&O) Inc., a 10-location facility based on the East Coast, benefit from hosting a

dynamic website that features patient information, news and events, resources, and outcomes research, even small facilities can see an increased return on investment with a significant web presence. Sunshine Prosthetics and Orthotics in Wayne, New Jersey, is a solo facility with a dynamic website, complete with educational information and biweekly blog posts. Owner Brooke Artesi, CPO, LPO, manages a spectrum of digital marketing efforts by outsourcing this work to a freelancer. She credits her vibrant website with attracting new customers and educating existing patients. “I get a lot of comments, even from older patients, that it’s very easy to navigate,” she says.

When determining whether it’s time for a website revamp at your facility website, keep in mind that it’s becoming increasingly important for sites to be mobile-friendly. For your O&P facility to receive maximum visibility in terms of SEO, your website should translate well to all mobile devices, which means text should be large, links should be easy to access, and you should never have to scroll sideways to see all of the content. “In April of 2015, Google announced an update focusing on mobile design, and even more mobile-focused updates have been made



Brooke Artesi, CPO, LPO

since,” says Thronsdon. “If your site is not meeting the mobile standard, besides proving a poor experience for your mobile visitors, you are most likely also experiencing a drop in your search rankings.” Thronsdon suggests running a test to see if Google deems your website “mobile-friendly” by visiting goo.gl/A1uLBR.

Social Media Strategies

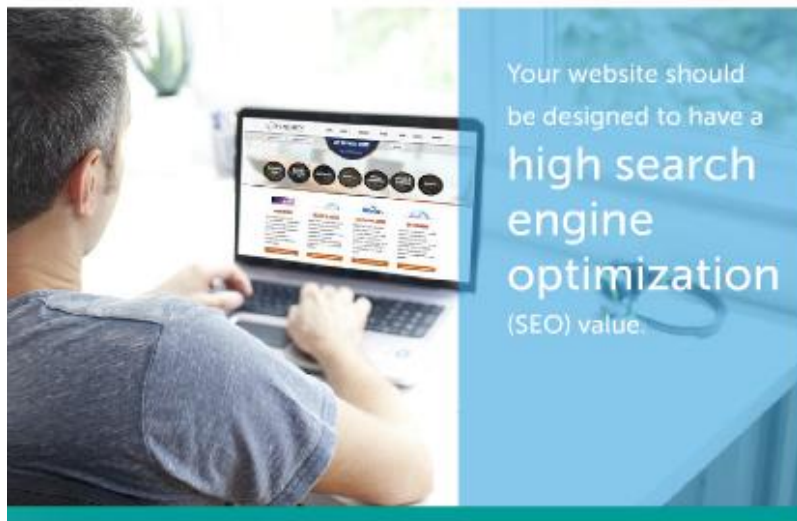
While a dynamic website is the centerpiece to a digital marketing strategy, it’s important to tie social media into the plan and consider posting to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other platforms. Social media is a critical component when marketing to young adults: Those in the 18- to 24-year-old age group are more than twice as likely as 45- to 54-year-olds to use social media for health-related discussions, according to Allied Health Worlds. Increasing numbers of adults of all ages, including seniors, however, are embracing these platforms.

Keep your message and your audience in mind when determining which platforms to focus on. “Your social media efforts should be based on where the audience is engaging,” says Thronsdon.



Katie Kolcun

At Ability P&O, Katie Kolcun, the facility’s marketing specialist, works closely with the company’s chief executive officer and founder, Jeffrey Brandt, CPO, to post information on several platforms. Because Facebook is the company’s best-received platform, Ability posts as often as three times a day to “very interactive patients and referral sources,” says Kolcun. Facebook allows for long, text-heavy



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posts as well as pictures, so “it’s great for telling a patient story with a really nice photo, or sharing all company news,” she says.

Kolcun says Ability’s dedication to Facebook has been a boon to business: “We’ve had patients go to their providers and ask their physicians to refer them to us because they’ve seen how we use the most advanced and innovative prosthetic and orthotic devices.”

Facebook also has been a success story at Reach OPS. Last year, Reach quadrupled its Facebook page “likes” through “intentional, regular posting,” says Sych. She and other staff post to Facebook three to four times each week, with messages of curated industry news, motivational messaging (which may include a stock image with a quote and subtle logo), and staff and activities pictures, says Sych. In addition, Reach occasionally posts pictures of patients wearing new technology—if the patients have signed media consent forms, in compliance with guidelines mandated by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

Beyond Facebook, there are several social media options that may work for O&P facilities. Ability P&O posts to Instagram and Twitter two or three times a week. “Twitter is great for branding news and networking,” says Kolcun. “The more you interact and stick to your brand, the more your posts go viral,” she says.

At Reach, Sych posts “newsworthy” content on Twitter, mainly using it “to follow our vendors and industry experts to see what’s new in the O&P world.” Reach also has a Pinterest page, where “there is not a ton of activity, but we think it’s a good idea to be found there,” says Sych. The page has three boards: one for prosthetic news, one “About Reach” board with photos, and one board featuring encouraging quotes.

Sych notes that social media is a great way for an O&P facility to connect with the community: “O&P is a niche market. People do not need us until they need us,” she says. “When they do, we want them to be familiar with the Reach name. Social media

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—Anne Sych



helps us to engage with our community and likewise helps people become familiar with our services.” Reach’s social media efforts have been particularly well received by patients who frequent the facility’s Chesapeake location—located near a military hospital. “Younger soldiers use social media more and are more familiar with the O&P technology available now,” says Sych. “They see it on Facebook, and they want to know more about it.”

Benefits of Blogging

Some O&P facilities are finding their audiences appreciate fresh content via regularly posted blogs. Blogs provide a space for a facility to demonstrate its expertise, offer valuable information to gain trust and loyalty, and create engaging content that can be re-shared via social media and email. Just as important, blogs provide a place to feature keyword-rich content that will elevate the website’s status in search engines such as Google.

At Sunshine O&P, Artesi sees blogging as a vital component of her marketing plan. The facility’s website features biweekly posts on an “Inspirations Blog,” which often focus on O&P patients who are positive role models, as well as news about the facility and staff.

Similarly, the blog at Reach OPS is an “Ask the Clinician” resource. “Anyone can submit questions from the website. The blog also is a great way for people to ‘meet’ our clinical staff,” says Sych. “Not only are you sharing your expertise with the world, but the search engines reward fresh content, so your visibility on the World Wide Web improves.” Sych admits that blogging can be a challenge for many organizations due to the time commitment required for developing fresh content, but she has been able to drive



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Reach's blogging effort by involving several staff practitioners and setting a schedule: “It is better to start with a manageable content calendar and grow from there; otherwise, it can be overwhelming. If you can get four staff to write one blog post per month each, you will have weekly posting. Getting everyone on board is essential to blogging success.”

Interest in Apps

With smartphones becoming a must-have for most Americans, the use of apps continues to grow. Statistics indicate that 19 percent of smartphone owners have at least one health app on their phone, according to research by Demi & Cooper Advertising and DC Interactive Group. A few O&P



businesses have taken advantage of this trend by developing facility-specific apps that appeal to both referral sources and patients.

Ability P&O recently debuted an app that features instructions for devices, a facility locator, Ability's quarterly Lifenhanced publication, and information about company events and courses, says Kolcun. “Ability practitioners, or referrals, can use the app to educate patients or send a device recommendation form, and patients can learn about their options prior to their initial Ability evaluation,” she says.

Hanger Clinic also recently created an O&P mobile reference app that features, among other things, searchable O&P device information, including photos and descriptions, and a “find-the-nearest” Hanger Clinic location function.

No “One-Size-Fits-All” Approach

Many practitioners acknowledge that digital outreach efforts may never be accessed by significant segments of the O&P population, such as older Medicare patients. But it has become increasingly important to promote O&P facilities in a way that captures the attention of e-health seekers.

Artesi, for example, has patients who have never seen her website—but her more tech-savvy clients and colleagues appreciate the information she posts on social media. In addition, having a technology-heavy presence helps support her standing as a “state-of-the-art facility.”

For those facilities that cannot hire a full-time staffer or outsource marketing entirely, there are ways to split up the tasks among current employees. “If you can't get a dedicated marketing person, create a manageable marketing plan you can delegate and manage in-house,” says Sych. “Pick one or two social media channels you think your patients will enjoy.”

The most important rule when establishing a digital marketing campaign is to realize you can't do it all, says Thronsdon. There are simply too many platforms available, so pick-and-choose those that will help meet your goals: “Do you want prospects? Do you want brand awareness? Or do you want people to know about a new location? Once you figure out your goal, you can decide which platform will work best.”

Expanding your digital marketing plan should be an integral component of your facility's long-term strategy. “Your partners and your competition are all investing in digital marketing,” says Sych. “It has become a necessity.” **CP**

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Did You Know?

ANOTHER IMPORTANT ELEMENT to consider when forming a digital marketing strategy is the latest **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines**, which are enforced by the Department of Justice for publicly held companies and will become the standard for private companies as soon as 2017 or 2018. These guidelines specify how to make content accessible, primarily for people with disabilities, but also for all user agents, including devices such as mobile phones. Forbin, a company that designs website and web applications for health-care companies, is currently working on tools businesses can use to test their site for compliance and to strategize how to become compliant, says Christina Thronsdon, the company's web marketing director.

